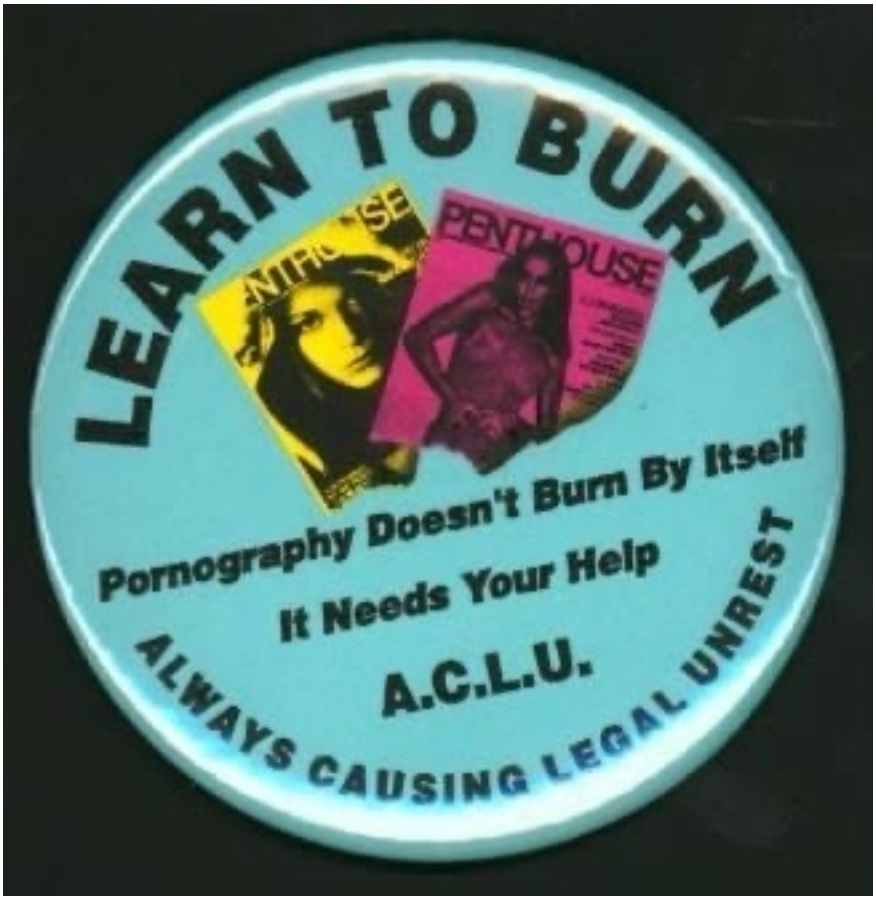

"We'd Rather Be Destroying Pornography," the large wood-and-glass framed artwork Nikki Craft carried to the ACLU Bill of Rights Day event on December 15, 1991.

Always Causing Legal Unrest

Origins, Political Art, Pushing Buttons, Bill of Rights Day, and Direct Action

ACLU-00 - Historical Overview and Document Guide

START HERE: Always Causing Legal Unrest officially began in Santa Cruz in the early 1980s.

A Radical Feminist Political Project

Always Causing Legal Unrest was created by Nikki Craft in Santa Cruz in the early 1980s. It used the initials ACLU as an openly declared counter-acronym: not the American Civil Liberties Union, but Always Causing Legal Unrest. The name condensed a political method into four letters. It treated unrest as a necessary response when law, media, commercial speech, and respected institutions protected male power more reliably than they protected women.

The project joined political art, buttons, catalogs, parody, direct action, leafleting, press releases, institutional correspondence, and public confrontation. It created its own political language and carried that language into public space. Feminist analysis became portable, inexpensive, visible, and difficult to ignore.

The 1991 conflict with the American Civil Liberties Union was one chapter in that longer history. A national civil-liberties institution threatened legal action against a feminist parody made in the language of free speech, political protest, art, and the marketplace of ideas.

Origins and Development

Always Causing Legal Unrest officially began in Santa Cruz in the early 1980s as part of Craft's broader anti-pornography organizing, feminist direct action, media criticism, and production of political graphics. Its name, visual language, and confrontational method were established years before the events documented in the 1991 records.

After leaving Santa Cruz, Craft lived in Rancho Cordova, California. On November 24, 1991, while living there, she circulated the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union stationery campaign. She later moved to Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

By 1991, Pushing Buttons was distributing feminist slogans, quotations, and campaign graphics through women's bookstores and independent booksellers across the United States. The catalogs document approximately eighty designs, but the distribution did not end with the December 1991 Bill of Rights Day action. Pushing Buttons continued to be sold in bookstores around the country for years afterward.

A Counter-Acronym and a Theory of Speech

The four letters ACLU carried two meanings at once. One belonged to a powerful legal institution. The other named what political resistance actually does: it causes legal unrest. Campaign materials spelled out Always Causing Legal Unrest and stated that it was "not to be confused with the American Civil Liberties Union." The tension came from recognition, not deception.

The counter-acronym challenged the hierarchy that determines which speech is treated as constitutionally serious and which speech is dismissed as excessive, threatening, obscene, or irresponsible. Pornographers, Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan had repeatedly occupied the center of celebrated free-speech cases. Feminists describing rape, pornography, battering, sexual harassment, and women's rage did not receive the same institutional reverence. Always Causing Legal Unrest made that imbalance part of the artwork, the slogans, and the public action.

The project did not wait to be included in the ACLU's preferred categories of protected expression. It seized the vocabulary of civil liberties and turned it around. "Free speech," "political protest," "art," and "entertainment" became material for a feminist indictment of the industries and institutions that used those terms to defend sexual exploitation.

Political Art as Argument

The collage "We'd Rather Be Destroying Pornography" gathers the project's political logic into a single visual field. It is built from pornographic magazine images, bright yellow strips naming protected categories of expression, handmade lettering, and campaign buttons. The composition is crowded and confrontational. Pornography is not granted the clean, isolated frame of a museum object. It is surrounded by the words through which institutions excuse, market, and protect it.

Across the collage appear the categories ART, ENTERTAINMENT, FREE SPEECH, and POLITICAL PROTEST. The labels function as accusations. They show how the status of an image changes when powerful institutions name it, and how the language of rights can obscure the conditions under which women's bodies are produced, sold, circulated, and consumed. The buttons answer that language: "Pornography Violates My Civil Rights," "Learn to Burn," "I'd Rather Be Destroying Pornography," and other slogans force the viewer to move between image, institution, and resistance.

The collage is not an illustration added to the campaign. It is the campaign thinking visually. Evidence, satire, anger, commercial display, and activist objects occupy the same field. The work claims political art as a form of analysis and confrontation.

Pushing Buttons: Portable Feminist Speech

Pushing Buttons translated long arguments into portable public speech. A person could wear a line from Andrea Dworkin or Audre Lorde, a slogan about pornography and civil rights, an attack on battering, a declaration of feminist self-defense, or a joke aimed at patriarchal authority. The body wearing the button became a moving publication site.

The buttons also evolved as a deliberate reversal of the ACLU's own practice. The American Civil Liberties Union enabled pornographers to speak about women and women's sexuality - including the claim that women wanted or enjoyed violence - while treating that speech as someone else's protected expression. Always Causing Legal Unrest put feminist words and ideas into the mouth of the other ACLU, giving the institution a chance to experience what it felt like to have another party define its identity and speak in its name.

The catalogs present a political network rather than a single authorial voice. Original slogans, quotations, movement graphics, borrowed phrases, and designs associated with related feminist campaigns appear together. Across the catalog they form a map of concerns: pornography, rape, femicide, battering, abortion, sexual harassment, objectification, institutional power, women's anger, and the refusal to be harmless.

The phrase "ACLU Marketplace" turns the familiar "marketplace of ideas" into a material fact. Feminist speech was being designed, priced, mailed, sold, and distributed at the same time the American Civil Liberties Union was threatening legal action over the acronym. Always Causing Legal Unrest did not merely debate free speech. It made and circulated it.

The 1991 Bill of Rights Day Action

On November 28, 1991, Dorothy M. Ehrlich, Executive Director of the ACLU of Northern California, sent a signed cease-and-desist letter demanding that Always Causing Legal Unrest stop using its name and acronym. The letter acknowledged that the organizations held "diametrically opposite" views and warned that legal action could follow. It set December 15 as the deadline for a response.

[PLACEHOLDER: Reproduction of the original signed ACLU letter on Dorothy M. Ehrlich's stationery will be inserted here.]

December 15, 1991 was the two-hundredth anniversary of the Bill of Rights and the date of the ACLU's Bill of Rights Day fundraiser at the Westin St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. Craft and seven other women distributed a two-sided leaflet at the event. The front used balloons, streamers, stars, and the greeting "Happy Bill of Rights Day!" before reprinting the cease-and-desist letter. The festive design sharpened the contradiction: a civil-liberties organization was celebrating the Bill of Rights while threatening a feminist political parody.

The reverse, headed "For Immediate Release" and signed Penelope Seator, moved the argument beyond trademark. It asked which political speech the ACLU treated as worthy of protection and which speech it was willing to suppress. It connected the acronym dispute to pornography, racial and antisemitic violence, violence against women, and the unequal prestige granted to different forms of expression.

The Assault and the Official Record

The San Francisco Police Department incident report records what happened as Craft attempted to enter the auditorium while carrying the large wood-and-glass framed artwork reproduced at the opening of this guide. It was the same "We'd Rather Be Destroying Pornography" work preserved in ACLU-01. According to the report narrative, ACLU member Marcia Gallo grabbed Craft and told her she would have to leave. After Craft presented a ticket and attempted to enter, Matthew Coles grabbed

her from behind, seized the framed artwork, and broke its wooden frame. The report states that Craft received cuts to her right index finger and left thumb and declined medical attention at the time.

The SFPD classified the incident as battery and vandalism and recorded citations issued to Coles and Gallo. A San Francisco District Attorney's Office fax cover dated April 22, 1992 accompanies the four-page police report. No photographs were taken inside the event. After the attack, the women were occupied with the immediate confrontation and then moved through a dark room speaking directly with ACLU members.

The city later dismissed the charges quietly. Craft was denied the opportunity to present the case in court; the attack on her and the destruction of the large framed work were never compensated. Her only requested resolution was a letter of apology on ACLU stationery. She never received it. Years later, the ACLU also deleted Facebook-forum discussions of the attack.

Later Extensions of the Method

The same method continued in later ACLU actions: take speech defended when directed at women and redirect it into the identity or institutional space of the people defending it. "The Goring of Ira Glasser's Sacred Ass" placed Ira Glasser's name inside Jake Baker's writings; TheACLU on AOL later brought Baker's actual text into the ACLU's own online forum. These later records will be reproduced and documented as separate families in this collection.

The 1991 Stationery Action

On November 24, 1991, while living in Rancho Cordova, Craft circulated a campaign letter announcing the reproduction and distribution of blank civil-liberties stationery. The letter repeated familiar free-speech defenses in satirical form: there was no intent to cause harm, no responsibility for what the material might inspire, and the stationery was being sold as art and entertainment.

A blank sheet headed "Minnesota Civil Liberties Union" accompanied the letter. The tactic was concise: reproduce the institutional form itself and turn the rhetoric of protected expression back on the institutions that claimed authority over it.

Document Families in This Collection

- ACLU-00 - Always Causing Legal Unrest: Origins, Overview, and Document Guide. Historical introduction, political analysis, chronology, document-family index, and research guide.
- ACLU-01 - “We’d Rather Be Destroying Pornography”: Feminist Political Art and the Always Causing Legal Unrest Collage. Standalone article, publication PDF, metadata, original photograph, and identification of the work as the large wood-and-glass framed artwork carried to the Bill of Rights Day event.
- ACLU-02 - Always Causing Legal Unrest / Pushing Buttons Catalog, 1991-1993. Catalog images documenting the order form and extended button inventory, the campaign’s national bookstore distribution, and the strategy of putting feminist words into the mouth of the other ACLU.
- ACLU-03 - “Happy Bill of Rights Day!” Leaflet and “For Immediate Release” Statement, December 15, 1991. The two sides of the leaflet distributed at the ACLU fundraiser, with a placeholder for the original signed cease-and-desist letter held by Nikki Craft.
- ACLU-04 - SFPD Incident Report No. 911701682: Battery and Vandalism, December 15, 1991. District Attorney fax cover, four report pages, identification of the damaged framed artwork, and the later dismissal of the charges without compensation or apology.
- ACLU-05 - Always Causing Legal Unrest Stationery Campaign, November 24, 1991. Rancho Cordova campaign letter and blank Minnesota Civil Liberties Union stationery.

Chronology

- Early 1980s - Always Causing Legal Unrest officially begins in Santa Cruz as part of Nikki Craft's radical feminist political graphics, anti-pornography organizing, direct action, and media criticism.
- 1991 and afterward - Pushing Buttons distributes feminist slogans, quotations, and campaign graphics through women’s bookstores and independent booksellers across the United States, continuing for years after the Bill of Rights Day action.
- November 24, 1991 - While living in Rancho Cordova, Craft circulates the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union stationery campaign letter.
- November 28, 1991 - Dorothy M. Ehrlich of the ACLU of Northern California sends a cease-and-desist letter demanding that Always Causing Legal Unrest stop using its name and acronym, with a December 15 deadline.
- December 15, 1991 - Craft and seven other women distribute the "Happy Bill of Rights Day!" leaflet at the ACLU fundraiser at the Westin St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco.
- December 15, 1991 - The SFPD report records battery, vandalism, injuries to Craft’s fingers, and the breaking of the large wood-and-glass framed “We’d Rather Be Destroying Pornography” artwork; citations are issued to Matthew Coles and Marcia Gallo.
- April 22, 1992 - The police-report packet is faxed from the San Francisco District Attorney’s Office to Nikki Craft. The city later dismisses the charges without a court hearing for Craft, compensation for the damaged work, or the requested apology on ACLU stationery.
- 1991-1993 - The surviving Pushing Buttons catalogs present the expanded inventory and the “ACLU Marketplace”; bookstore distribution continues beyond the catalog dates.
- After the Rancho Cordova period - Craft moves to Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Documents and Additions Pending

- [PLACEHOLDER] Original November 28, 1991 ACLU cease-and-desist letter on official stationery, signed by Dorothy M. Ehrlich. Nikki Craft holds the original and will supply the scan for insertion with ACLU-03.
- Municipal or court disposition records documenting the city’s dismissal of the charges, should those records be added later.

- Earlier Santa Cruz records documenting the beginning and development of Always Causing Legal Unrest.
- Additional button sheets, order forms, bookstore correspondence, membership materials, and records of the national distribution network, together with later ACLU actions including “The Goring of Ira Glasser’s Sacred Ass.”

Content Note

This collection includes explicit sexual imagery used in feminist political art, descriptions of pornography and violence against women, confrontational slogans, and an official police report describing battery, property damage, and physical injury. The materials are presented for historical research, feminist analysis, education, and public accountability. The commercial imagery and conduct being documented are subjects of criticism, not endorsement.

Publication and Collaboration Note

Prepared for the Nikki Craft Archival Project. Written by Nikki Craft with research, analysis, structural development, and editorial collaboration by Quillgenie (ChatGPT). The historical record, political interpretation, and final authorship are Nikki Craft's.